History and Development of Gurmat Sangeet

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Brief introduction to Indian music

The Indian sub continent possesses an immensely rich and varied Musical culture, whose origins can be traced back to ancient Hindu Vedas of the 2nd century [1]. The most fundamental component of Indian music is Raag. Raag is derived from the Sanskrit word "rang" meaning "to colour". Conceptually, raag may be thought of as an acoustic method of "colouring" the mind of the listener with emotion. Practically, raag can be (grossly) simplified to mean "a pattern of notes used as a basis for improvisation". There are various raags for expressing various moods and a system of raags forms the basis of all Indian music to some extent or another. Over time, two systems of classical Indian music have developed which differ to a degree, Karnatak Sangeet in the south and Hindustani Sangeet in the north [1]. The former is considered more pure, precise and systemised than Hindustani Sangeet. The latter is more eclectic, having absorbed the influence of Muslim music practices. Karnatak music also tends to be more preoccupied with religious and mystic content but they both share many common raags and features. Due to India's cultural and ethnic diversity there are also various forms of regional folk music which serve not only as entertainment but also as a channel through which emotions such as joy and sadness can be conveyed on poignant occasions like weddings, births, deaths etc.

What is Gurmat Sangeet?

Gurmat roughly translates to English as meaning the tenets/philosophy of the Guru(s). We can take Gurmat to mean the teachings of the Sikh faith, which is catholic in nature and fundamentally, preaches a truthful way of life. Sangeet could in western terms be defined as an art form encompassing both instrumental and vocal music. Gurmat Sangeet (popularly known as Kirtan) could therefore be described as the singing and performing of devotional music in accordance with the teachings of the Gurus.

In Gurmat Sangeet, raag plays an extremely important role. It has it's own distinctive nature and gives each Shabad a definitive mood [2]. It's a channel through which the emotions and feelings contained within the Shabad can be effectively conveyed. In addition to raags from classical trAadtions (Hindustani and Karnatak) Shabads in the Guru Granth Sahib have also been rendered in raags derived from rural folk trAadtions such as Ghoreean, Suhag and Alohnian. Punjab, the birthplace of Sikhism is especially rich in folk music.

Sikhism divides the human character into two equally important halves: The mun (mind) - representing the selfish/impatient side and aatma (soul or conscience) representing the honest and sincere side. The Shabads contain examples and lessons for the mind and soul to talk to and understand each other. In understanding and reconciling these two sides one recognises oneself and attains unity with the Creator [2]. Thus man's natural instinct for music is utilised and channelled, through Gurmat Sangeet, towards achieving higher spiritual goals.

Though the appeal of Kirtan is generally directed to one's feelings and instinct, the element of intellect is not ignored [1]. The Gurus maintain that ultimately, music is

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secondary to the Shabad. Music is the medium through which the spirit of the Shabad is propagated. The main aim of kirtan is to hymn the glory of God and to get spiritually closer to Him. This can only be achieved by acting upon the lessons/instructions within the Shabad not merely by listening to it. Thus, whilst performing Kirtan, the words and meaning attached to the Shabad must have pre-eminence over all else. Although musical and vocal competence is requisite, showcasing musical skills or demonstrations of singing prowess, at the expense of the words of the Shabad, are undesirable.

History and development of Gurmat Sangeet [1]

The history of Gurmat Sangeet is inextricably linked to the history of the Sikh Gurus - who in addition to being spiritual, social and often military leaders were also expert practitioners and patrons of devotional music.

The link between music and spirituality was present from the birth of Sikhism. Guru Nanak would sing his divine shabads whilst his companion Bhai Mardana played the Rabab. He would instruct Bhai Mardana which strings to play for a particular Shabad in order to create an appropriate mood and atmosphere Guru Nanak regarded hymn-singing and hymn-listening with devotion as a link between man and God. He writes:

"Musical sound (nad) originated from God. It's holy in every sense. The best way to worship God is to blend the divine Word with sacred music"

Guru Nanak's view of music and spirituality contrasted greatly with orthodox Muslim rulers of the time, who saw music to be an immoral art. Guru Nanak confronted such views by expressing the true function of music as a vehicle of spiritual inspiration. Upper caste Hindus were also uncomfortable with Guru Nanak's philosophy since it challenged their dominant position in Indian society. Guru Nanak regarded Kirtan as the highest of all deeds and a path to salvation open to all - regardless of caste, gender or social status.

"Singing the Kirtan of the Lord's Praises in the Saadh Sangat, the Company of the Holy, is the highest of all actions"[SGGS p 642]

"Ravi Daas, the tanner, praised the Lord, and sang the Kirtan of His Praises each and every instant. Although he was of low social status, he was exalted and elevated, and people of all four castes came and bowed at his feet" [SGGS p 733]

In all Guru Nanak composed 974 hymns in nineteen raags. Gurmat Sangeet continued to be steAadly developed and promoted by Guru Angad, Guru Amardas and Guru Ramdas.

Guru Arjun's greatest contribution to the Sikh religion was his compilation of the Scriptures into the Aad Granth. It contains the hymns not only of the Gurus but also of saints and minstrels belonging to different religions and castes. Guru Arjan installed the Scripture-Aad Granth-in Harmandar Sahib at Amritsar in 1604. It contains his 2218 hymns in thirty raags. Guru Arjan maintained a number of musicians who performed kirtan at his court. Up until the time of Guru Arjun all the musicians performing Kirtan had been paid professionals but Guru Arjun ordered that every Sikh should learn Kirtan, and not depend solely on the services of professional

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musicians. Such non-professional singers came to be known as ragis. He personally trained the ragis in hymn-singing in the appropriate ragas. Guru Arjan was not only a great singer, but also an eminent musicologist. He devised a stringed musical instrument called the Sarinda which he played whilst singing.

Guru Hargobind was a great patron of musicians. He established a new class of singers called dhadhis and introduced the new instruments like Dhadh and Sarangi. The dhAads sang heroic deeds of old warriors and inspired the Guru's soldiers. Guru Tegh Bahadur composed 116 hymns in fifteen raags. He introduced a new raga called Jaijaiwanti and composed four hymns therein.

Guru Gobind Singh was a great patron of poets and musicians. Guru Gobind Singh himself created and played the Taus, and introduced another stringed instrument, the Dilruba, to Gurmat Sangeet.

In conclusion:

1. The Gurus democratised sacred music and brought it from the exclusive temple halls to the homes of the ordinary men and women.

2. The Gurus brought the awareness of regional music to the masses by singing composing Shabad's in folk tunes in addition to classical raags.

3. The Gurus used music to break down religious and cultural barriers during a period of extreme intolerance and religious persecution. They used both north and south Indian musical styles. They blended Hindu and Muslim music practices and popularised raags such as Asa and Suhi, which have strong Muslim influences.

References:

[1] "*Indian Classical Music And Sikh Kirtan*" Gobind Singh Mansukhmani (M.A, LL.B, Ph.D.) © 1982

[2] "*Shabads and music from the Sikh Scriptures*" Booklet accompanying "Mere Mun" CD collection.

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